

So long (and thanks for all the fish)

I ran into Judith Messerle, AHIP, FMLA, in the lobby of the Chicago Hilton. "I've applied to be the new editor of the *Bulletin*," I said.

She gave me an inquiring look, as if to say, "Go on. . ."

"I think it's the right time for me to take something like this on."

It was the spring of 1999. I had been the director of the Lister Hill Library for several years and was starting to feel like I was getting the hang of it. An announcement had just recently gone out that the Medical Library Association (MLA) was seeking applications for a new editor for the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association (BMLA)*.

"And I'd get to write an editorial for every issue!"

Messerle rolled her eyes in mock (I think) horror. "Oh, now we're in for it," she teased.

Serving as the editor has been rewarding in very many ways, but I must confess that writing the editorial for each issue has been my favorite part. Working against a deadline (which I was always behind) pushed me in productive ways. If I got lost in the argument that I was making, I could not just abandon it—I had to keep following the thread and testing my ideas. My best editorials always surprised me and took me places that I did not expect to go when I started out. I have become a better maker of sentences, and I relish that.

Perhaps more importantly, however, serving as editor has deepened my commitment to the profession. Fifteen years ago, I was not so sure that this library stuff was right for me. Back then, I had recently been appointed director of the Medical Center Library at St. Louis University, following Messerle's departure for Harvard, and I did not think I was handling it very well. Even now, I cringe when I think of some of the bone-headed things I did. My personal life was a disaster with my first marriage crumbling around my ears. I had not played my guitar in years, and

just not very much in my life felt good. I was one unhappy boy, and I fantasized about chucking the whole thing and going off somewhere to try to be a freelance writer.

A few bits of good luck and some unexpected turns of events helped me to refocus and to renew my energy. By the time I saw that announcement for a new editor, I was confident that I was on the right path. I was excited about the opportunities that I saw for librarianship. I knew that the *BMLA* played a key part in helping us librarians understand and take advantage of some of those opportunities, and it seemed to me that this was an area in which I could be of some help.

I have a much better appreciation now for the breadth of the profession and for the range of issues that many of us struggle with every day. Again and again, I have been excited by what I have read in a new manuscript, written by somebody I had not heard of before. Every issue has been a tremendous learning experience. The articles in this issue nicely represent that range of interests: articles documenting the development of the MLA Benchmarking Network, investigations into the information-seeking behavior of different populations, reports from librarians working in atypical settings, and more.

Much has changed in the six years that I have been the editor. The name has changed, for one thing—from the *BMLA* to the *Journal of the Medical Library Association (JMLA)*. Most importantly, the reach of the journal has expanded greatly, thanks to its appearance on PubMed Central. As I pointed out in my editorial last October [1], each issue now gets tens of thousands of readers, and many of them are not members of the association. When I took it on, it was perceived by many MLA members to be elitist and esoteric, a journal that was of interest to only a small percentage of the members. I have worked

hard not only to make it more readable, but also to expand its scope. My rule of thumb has been that I do not expect that any one reader will be interested in every article of every issue, but I strive to make sure that everyone in MLA will find at least one article that is relevant and useful.

Every editor puts his or her own stamp on the journal. Since July 2005, all new submissions have been going to the new editor-in-chief, Nunzia Giuse, AHIP, director of the Eskin Biomedical Library (EBL) at Vanderbilt University, and her team, and, as I write this, their first issues are beginning to take shape. Giuse is certainly no stranger to the *JMLA*. She has authored or coauthored fifteen items for the *JMLA* or the *BMLA* in the last ten years (and as many more in other journals), as well as served a stint on the editorial board. She is well known for her commitment to integrating library services into clinical practice and is fiercely dedicated to the education and training of librarians who will have the skills and vision to take full advantage of the opportunities that changing technologies present.

Serving as her coeditors are three talented librarians, each of whom will bring her own slant and passion for the profession. Rebecca Jerome, Nila Sathe, and Taneya Koonce each have an established track record of research and publication (and Jerome and Sathe are also former *JMLA* editorial board members).

In their application to the *JMLA* Editor Search Committee, the team wrote:

[W]e advocate libraries' assumption of an active leadership role in developing innovations in the information purview. As experts in organizing, locating, and managing information, libraries should focus on improving or innovating information access and processing. We believe that libraries should not passively wait for future information innovations but should actively work towards creating them.

... We will continue previous editors' work to channel the journal as a means to enhance professionalism, innovation, and leadership in biomedical librarianship.

A tremendous amount of innovation is, indeed, going on in our profession. One of my goals as editor has been to have the journal represent as much of that innovation as possible. Among the challenges that the new editorial team faces will be to continue to make the journal itself an innovative and flexible vehicle for sharing knowledge. Six years ago, the *BMLA* was a print-only publication. Now it is also an open-access electronic journal and, with the online-only proceedings of the annual meeting published with the January issue and the online-only symposium on "Mapping the Literature of Nursing" that will accompany this issue, the association is moving into the "born-digital" realm as well.

My biggest frustration as editor has been the time-lag between initial submission of an article and its publication. One of the impacts of going open access has been a dramatic increase in the number of submissions. While this is a good thing in the abstract, it tends to increase the time-lag problem. As quickly as things move in our world these days, a delay of nine months to a year can no longer be considered acceptable.

Lately, there has been a lot of chatter in the biblioblogosphere about "Library 2.0." I have been critical of the term, but I strongly support many of the ideas that those kicking it around have endorsed. The key notion is that a new generation of Web-based tools—including instant messaging, blogs, wikis, and the like—are transforming the Web into a much more interactive and participatory medium. (Some of these ideas are explored in the article on the Semantic Web by Robu, Robu, and Thirion in this issue.) Librarians, the argument goes, need to seize on these capabilities as well to transform their relationship with library users and to make the library

experience a much more interactive and participatory one. Much of the Library 2.0 blog chatter exhibits the breathless excitement of those enamored with their wonderful new toys, but certainly these tools, along with the transformation of scholarly publishing into the digital arena, presents wonderful opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and development of new ways of sharing information. I would expect that over time, the *JMLA* will experiment with all of these.

While I have been working on this editorial, I have also been reading Thomas L. Friedman's book, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* [2]. I had not realized from the buzz that the book got when it first came out, how much it focuses on information technology issues that are central to librarianship. But in his talk at the Southern Chapter annual meeting in Puerto Rico last October, Roger Guard strongly recommended that all librarians read this book. Because Guard is a pretty innovative and thoughtful guy himself, I take his recommendations seriously, and I have to agree. I am not enthusiastic about Friedman's "flat world" metaphor, and his writing style occasionally falls into the same kind of breathless enthusiasm that I find distracting in the Library 2.0 bloggers, but the issues he raises are absolutely the issues that we have to face as we seek to carve out an effective and exciting future for librarians in the twenty-first century.

The *JMLA* will continue to play a significant role in that transformation, but it will also itself be transformed. Back when I first told Messerle that I hoped to become the next editor, hardly anybody was talking about "open access." There was very little, if any, discussion of institutional repositories. The "big deal" had yet to be invented. Academic libraries held very few licenses to e-journals, and hospital libraries had virtually none. It would be easy to extend the list. It would have been impos-

sible to have predicted all that has happened. Similarly, it is impossible to predict the next five or six years or to imagine how the transformations will play out. We can, however, be quite sure that it will be an exciting ride.

One final thought. Over the years, I have been deeply gratified but also slightly puzzled when someone has come up to me and complimented me on "doing such a good job" with the journal. I am never quite sure what they mean. It is a good thing, certainly, if readers believe that the quality of the publication continues to improve, but I am afraid their congratulations are somewhat misplaced. Ultimately, the credit belongs with the authors, of course. They are the ones who find the time to do the work, to write the papers, to put up with my suggestions and questions, and to share what they have learned with their colleagues. If it weren't for the manuscripts that arrived unbidden, week after week, there would not have been a damn thing that I could do to protect the stature that the *JMLA* has earned over the past century.

Credit, as well, goes to the members of the editorial board—the peer reviewers who put in countless hours reading and rereading manuscripts and then writing reviews and making recommendations, always with the intention of helping an author make a great paper even better or make a marginal paper a success. Similarly, the associate editors, volunteers all, have been passionately determined to make their sections shine.

Behind it all, there is the MLA headquarters staff. I can never fully express my gratitude to Susan Talmage, the editorial assistant, who ensures that every issue is edited consistently and to the highest professional standards, and to Lynanne Feilen, MLA's director of publications, who, among many other things, deserves the lion's share of the credit for getting the journal up on PubMed Central.

I have had a great time. I have had the great pleasure of working

closely with many of the best among us, and I have had a front row seat from which to witness the fascinating evolution of this profession that I have come to love so much. To the MLA membership, who have entrusted me with your journal, I can only say thank you.

There. I'm done.

*T. Scott Plutchak Editor
tscott@uab.edu
University of Alabama at
Birmingham
Birmingham, Alabama*

References

1. PLUTCHAK TS. The impact of open access. *J Med Libr Assoc* 2005 Oct; 93(4):419–21.
2. FRIEDMAN TL. The world is flat: a brief history of the twenty-first century. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.